

## On being "Stared and Grinned at by the Vulgar"

By DR. RONALD S. WILKINSON \*

Is there such a person as a timid field entomologist? I think so, for most of us will admit that at times, when pursuing our quarry with net or camera, we have encountered situations in which we have been "stared and grinned at by the vulgar". I choose these words carefully, for they are from an actual quotation of 1826, and despite the considerably amended modern usage of the word 'vulgar' from its original and more innocent meaning, William Spence's phrase must stir at least some memories. Who among us has not felt, at least momentarily, in the field that discretion might be the better part of valour? Of course, we have all overcome such thoughts . . .

Well, perhaps not. From the very beginning of entomological investigation, we have had to face those who have believed that a student of insects must be eccentric, or worse. In fact, if we read the laments of some of our predecessors, we must think that once almost all of the world was 'the player on the other side', and the current cartoon stereotype of the entomologist as a rotund man in khaki shorts and pith helmet pursuing a gaudy lepidopteron at full tilt has had frequent precedents in history.

From many possible choices, a few examples will suffice. Jezreel Jones, when collecting at Cadiz for one of the founders of scientific entomology, James Petiver, wrote to his mentor in 1701 that he had been "suspected for one that studys witchcraft, necromancy and a madman" (Sloane MS. 4063, f. 76r). Among early entomologists Jones was hardly alone, and counter-measures had to be devised. Early clap-nets (Wilkinson, 1978) were jointed so that they could be taken apart and carried in a small compass, not only for convenience but for the purpose of concealment; eventually they could fit within the ample greatcoats of the time. In 1826 Kirby and Spence warned fellow entomologists in the very popular *Introduction to Entomology* that "with all your implements about you, you will perhaps at first be stared and grinned at by the vulgar . . . Things that are unusual are too often termed ridiculous; and the philosopher . . . is too often regarded by the ignorant plebeian as little short of a madman".

Kirby and Spence's arguments to the philosophical temperament must have been cold comfort to many entomologists, who continued to resort to ruses of concealment. For example, the internal cavity of the hat had been used as a pinning surface while collecting insects in the field since Petiver's time (Sloane MS. 3332, f. 2r-v), and that method was still

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recommended in the nineteenth century. Kirby and Spence suggested it, and it was certainly preferable to the practice of pinning insects to the *outside* of the hat, used by William Swainson, who was following in the tradition of Linnaeus' pupil Andre Sparrmann. But Sparrmann's collections were made at the Cape, and Swainson's triumphs were accomplished far from the inquiring eyes of his fellow Englishmen. Indeed, despite the new wave of interest in natural history, when writing of the climate of opinion in 1835 Edward Newman had to admit that "ninety-nine persons out of a hundred, even at the present day, [think] that a person who could take an interest in pursuing a butterfly is a madman. [Still that suggestion of lunacy!] The collector of insects must, therefore, make up his mind to sink in the opinion of his friends; to be the object of the undisguised pity and ridicule of the mass of mankind, from the moment in which he commences such a pursuit" (Newman, 1835).

Social historians, take note, for from the viewpoint of the historian of biology, this was the 'golden age' of British entomology. Haworth and Donovan had ushered in a new century of scientific endeavour; Stephens and Curtis had been publishing their grand surveys in parts for some years; the completion of Kirby and Spence's work, which had a wide influence in promoting popular awareness of entomology, was almost a decade in the past. Newman's highly literate *Entomological Magazine* had been initiated in 1832 as the voice of the Entomological Club, and the Entomological Society, later to be chartered as the Royal Entomological Society of London, had been founded in 1833. Yet, if we can accept the words of those who lived through the time, on the popular level entomologists were still considered to be very strange persons, no matter how their numbers were swelling in village and city. We cannot escape the fact that entomologists were less tolerated by the populace than were those participants in other aspects of the natural history movement which swept Victorian Britain. While seeking his lichen and fern, the botanist was relatively ignored; those who with Charles Kingsley sought 'the wonders of the shore' were comparatively unmolested; but entomologists were hooted by small boys, as well as older gentlemen who ought to have known better.

This attitude was softened somewhat as the century wore on, but later Victorians continued to mention popular slight, and the continued use of devices obviously designed for concealment as well as utility demonstrates that abuse was taken seriously. The clever umbrella net design appeared in various forms in various countries, for British entomologists were hardly alone in their problem. An umbrella net in its cover could be carried on a public vehicle or along a public road without notice, and in many cases actual umbrellas were used for entomological purposes. The renowned American herpetologist Raymond L. Ditmars, who was originally an entomolo-

gical assistant to William Beutenmüller at the American Museum of Natural History, described a late Victorian gentleman who utilized an umbrella and a most unobtrusive costume for collecting (Ditmars, 1932): "I recognized Otto Dientz, a prominent [New York] business man. He was attired in a gray summer suit and looked as well tailored as if he had stepped from a bandbox . . . On all his trips he carried a tan silk umbrella, slipped into a cover which made it look like a cane. Arriving at the area of operation he would open his umbrella, stroll leisurely along a wood road, and coming to certain bushes invert the umbrella, and then tap the branches with a stick". Deception had come a long way from the days of Jezreel Jones.

Specialized entomological variations of the umbrella ranged from a beating net in which the handle was jointed at a right angle to the axis of the bumbershoot for convenience in collecting (an excellent line engraving is reproduced by Banks, 1909, p. 42) to the net with an umbrella handle which was frequently sold well into this century. My collection of historical entomological equipment includes several of these, equipped with a jointed spring steel net ring which collapses flat against the rod. Such nets could be used for sweeping, beating and aerial work, and yet could be folded and wound into a form which looked superficially like an umbrella. Many contemporary entomologists recall using this sort of net, and the design may still be in active service. The 'hidden net' has had several other variations, and perhaps its most modern development has been the pocket net. Ditmars (1932) recalled well-dressed entomologists on an American field outing whisking nets from their rear pockets to collect Microlepidoptera. That tradition still survives, due to the small spring steel net sold by Watkins and Doncaster, which can be coiled within the pocket and carried for any emergency. (I have been thankful for mine on many an occasion when a more conspicuous net would have invited unwanted attention.)

Quite frankly, we all do not have the courage of such heroes as the American lepidopterist and museum director William J. Holland, who in his youth in North Carolina was determined to capture a specimen of the magnificent sexually dimorphic fritillary *Speyeria diana* (Cramer), to the remarkable extent of pursuing it past the onlooking students of a girls' school. He later recalled (Holland, 1898) that he "would rather have faced a cannonade in those days than a bevy of boarding-school misses, but there was no alternative". Greater love hath no man! Holland displayed similar fortitude many years later, when, as a well-known guest in an elegant hotel in Rio, he was faced with another 'moment of truth': "At the dinner table the attention of the throng of fashionably dressed ladies and gentlemen was attracted to a large moth, brilliantly colored, which came fluttering about the tables. I slipped into the hall and seized my net, and as the gay insect came by, with a quick stroke captured it; I was greeted with a salvo of

applause from the assembled guests" (Holland, 1913). But what would the reaction have been had the moth evaded Holland's net? No, few of us have such *panache*.

When recalling historical precedents to illustrate an argument, we are all tempted to add improvements of our own. As a hopeful young collector in the early and mid-1940s, I was forced to conceal my net and other regalia as well as I could to escape the ridicule of the local boys and (I regret to say) some of my less philosophical neighbours. Once in the field I was in my glory until an 'intruder' entered the meadow or forest path, whereupon I hid behind a tree until the unwelcome interloper passed and I could return to the solitary pleasure of the chase. College days brought no improvement; how could I explain to a favoured girl that I had to leave her suddenly to pursue a moth which had just fluttered by?

All that was many years ago, and one might think that experience resulted in callousness. No. When I was teaching at a large American university I found that one of the very best situations for collecting moths was a local restaurant illuminated by huge incandescant lamps, but unfortunately frequented by as many students as Lepidoptera. The reaction to my acrobatics there is best forgotten, as are the encounters with police, farmers, inebriates, mere passers-by, and various categories of others whose comments cannot really have been much different from those which prompted Newman to write his observations in 1835.

Human nature changes slowly, and entomologists must relegate such reminiscences to sherry-parties and not allow painful memories to dampen their enthusiasm. In fact, we can sometimes recall the occasional opposite reaction to balance the account. Several years ago a colleague called attention to a large and conspicuous moth resting at a considerable height near one of the lamps flanking the entrance to the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. Even at that distance I could recognize the moth as *Catocala marmorata* Edw., one of the rarest of its genus in the United States, only captured once before (in the nineteenth century) in the District of Columbia, and a moth which I had not taken in thirty years as a specialist in the *Catocala*. Like Alfred Russel Wallace at Batchian, my heart began to beat violently, and I quickly jogged to my nearby home for net and bottle. Returning at the noon hour, I found a scene more populous than Holland's girls' school and Rio banquet combined. Scores of persons stood about the entrance, but the unperturbed moth was still there. It was resting in a position higher than my reach, so I requisitioned the tallest person I could find. He willingly placed my net over the moth and drew it down until I could bottle it. To my great surprise there was applause from the audience. The unexpected result reminded me of Holland, and I have since been heartened by the reminiscence. However, I sometimes wonder, as I have about Holland in Rio: what if I had missed the moth? I don't wish to think about that . . .



## References

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LYONETIA CLERKELLA L. (LEP.: LYONETIIDAE) IN LARGE NUMBERS. — This year I have noted a very large number of leaves of my apple trees to have been mined by larvae of this species, some leaves carrying as many as four mines, and their characteristic hammock-like cocoons.

At the same time, there has been an almost complete disappearance of *Phyllonorycter blancardella* F. (which species has absorbed *P. concomitella* Bankes, to which form the majority of those inhabiting my apple trees belonged) and I have seen less than a dozen mines this year where the species was in considerable numbers in previous years. *Callisto guttea* Haworth is present in its customary numbers.

It would be interesting to know whether the abundance of *clerkella* and the scarcity of *blancardella* are general; of so, these phenomena could be ascribed to climatic conditions, but if not, some other reasons must be found. — S. N. A. JACOBS, 54 Hayes Lane, Bromley BR2 9EE.

MACROGLOSSUM STELLATARUM L. IN S. DEVON, 1979. — At the north end of Slapton Sands one was seen on 6th July, two on 10th and 11th July, one on 12th and 13th July and finally, one on 26th July. — H. L. O'HEFFERNAN, c/o 15 Green Park Way, Chillington, Kingsbridge, South Devon TQ7 2HY.

AUTOGRAPHA GAMMA L. AND NOMOPHILA NOCTUELLA D. & S. IN S. DEVON. — *A. gamma* numbers in the M.V. trap from 14th May to 11th September 1979 were: — May (6 nights) nil, June (22) 9; July (22) 10; August (22) 150; September (9) 16. Total 185. *N. noctuella* numbers were: — May, nil; June, nil; July, 7; August, 12; September, 1. Total 20. — H. L. O'HEFFERNAN, c/o 15 Green Park Way, Chillington, Kingsbridge, South Devon, TQ7 2HY.

THE CRESCENT-STRIPED: APAMEA OBLONGA HAW. AND SLENDER BRINDLE: A. SCOLOPACINA ESP. IN E. SUSSEX. — Two fine *A. oblonga* were taken this year near the banks of of the River Cuckmere, about seven miles west of Eastbourne, and at a spot about a mile inland where the river is still tidal. They were captured just after dusk had fallen.

On the 6th August 1979, two examples of *A. scolopacina* were taken at light at Ninfield; and on 10th August, two more. This moth appears to be of infrequent occurrence in this part of Sussex. — M. PARSONS, The Forge, Russells Green, Ninfield, Battle, East Sussex.